



A POSSIBLE CEASEFIRE IN UKRAINE IN 2025: IS THE OSCE ON BOARD?

BY LOÏC SIMONET

AUTHOR

Dr. Loïc Simonet

started his career at the French Defence Ministry in Paris. In 2008, he was appointed Politico-Military Counsellor of the French Permanent Representation to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna. In 2013, he joined the Secretariat of the OSCE as Senior External Co-operation Officer, until June 2021. In this capacity, he liaised with the European Union and NATO. In 2021, he joined the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip) as a Researcher.

IMPRESSUM:

Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik – oiip,
Austrian Institute for International Affairs
A-1090 Vienna, Währinger Straße 3/12,
www.oiip.ac.at, info@oiip.ac.at

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“Where is the OSCE during Russia’s war on Ukraine?” asked Pál Dunay (Dunay, 2022). To be honest, not in the spotlight. However, changing political realities in 2025 might provide the Vienna organization with renewed legitimacy, fifty years after the signature of the Helsinki Accords that served as its groundwork.

After more than 1,000 days of attrition war, several factors may bring the conflict in Eastern Europe to a turning point.

Despite both parties’ recent military escalation, there seems to be no end in sight on the battlefield. Neither side has the resources to achieve a decisive victory, a situation that academics describe as “mutually hurting stalemates” (Slantchev & Goemans, 2025). Militarily, Russia appears to be on the ascendancy, but Putin’s goal of defeating the Ukrainian armed forces in open combat and occupying more Ukrainian territory is a “strategic impossibility” (Dickson & Holowinsky, 2024). It is doubtful that 2025, which marks the 80th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazism, will coincide with a triumphal parade on Moscow’s Red Square. The resilience and morale shown by the Ukrainian armed forces deserve admiration and tribute, but Kyiv knows that it will not recover Crimea and the Donbas by force. After more than two years of grinding conflict, the weariness of its population is becoming evident.

Because neither side can achieve its ultimate goals, new approaches to ending the Ukraine war are beginning to surface. Compared to only a few months ago, more actors are ready to look at alternative scenarios.

Although the priority for Kyiv currently remains concluding the war on favorable terms and gaining maximum leverage over Russia, President Volodymyr Zelensky declared in November 2024 that he would “do everything to end this war next year through diplomatic means” (The Kyiv Independent, 2024a) and be ready to start negotiation under certain conditions (Zelensky, 2024). In his New Year’s address, Zelensky called for a “just peace” in 2025, without mentioning the

A negotiation is coming in Ukraine, and the OSCE needs to be ready

liberation of territories occupied by the Kremlin army as a pre-condition (President of Ukraine, 2024). 52% of Ukrainians would like to see their country negotiate an end to the hostilities as soon as possible. Furthermore, a fair share of the population believes Ukraine should be open to ceding some territory in exchange for peace (Vigers, 2024). Recent opinion polls published by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) speak volumes about the uncertainty of the Ukrainian people (Grushetskyi, 2024a).

In the corridors of power in Europe, realism is on the rise, even at the vanguard of the hard-liners.¹ Some leaders are again tempted by a policy of appeasement, as shown by the telephone call between German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Vladimir Putin on 15 November 2024. In

¹ « Les Ukrainiens ont à mener des discussions réalistes sur les questions territoriales et eux seuls peuvent les conduire » (Macron, 2025).



As in 2014, the Vienna organization might be the first responder and the last resort

the ‘Global South’, calls to end the war are getting louder, as evidenced by China and Brazil’s joint proposal for peace negotiations (Brazilian Presidency, 2024). Competing crises—such as the great reshuffle in the Middle East—require urgent political focus.

The return of a master dealmaker as U.S. president, who promised to resolve the conflict “within 24 hours” of taking office—more realistically, within six months, as the President-elect himself revised (Goncharova, 2025), or at least 100 days, according to his designated envoy for Ukraine, retired general and former senior official Keith Kellogg (Fenbert, 2025)—is a game-changer. Asked whether D. Trump’s victory brings peace in Ukraine closer or further away, 45% of the Ukrainians believe that it brings peace closer (Grushetskyi, 2024b).

I do not have a crystal ball to rely on. However, I concur with Branislav Slantchev and Hein Goemans: it seems realistically impossible to entirely rule out a Russian-Ukrainian agreement in 2025 (Slantchev & Goemans, 2025). The 2022 failed talks between Moscow and Kyiv show that any progress will be hard to achieve, and it is extremely unlikely the two sides will strike a comprehensive peace agreement. Thus any deal might be limited to a military ceasefire, with political talks deferred to a later phase (Tenenbaum & Litra, 2025). It is not the purpose of this paper to judge whether negotiation is ripe and timely: this must be left in the hands of the Ukrainians, and we must continue to support them militarily “not just to hold on, but to tilt the balance to their favour” (Kallas, 2024) before they arrive at the negotiation table. But, in the meantime, it is our responsibility to stress our preparedness and explore all opportunities.

The period preceding the opening of negotiations to address a conflict is always a dangerous one. It requires distance and technical expertise to define a framework and substance for the discussion. This is where the OSCE, with its contribution as a platform for discussion, its unique normative *acquis* and its experience in Ukraine, can step in to help resolve the critical questions that lie ahead. “Back to diplomacy” was the recommendation of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project, tasked by the Swiss Chairpersonship-in-office in 2014, to provide the OSCE with a new momentum (Panel of Eminent Persons, 2015): in a new context in which “diplomacy offers the most realistic path for ending not only the war but also, over the long term, Russia’s occupation of Ukrainian territory” (Haass & Kupchan, 2023), the OSCE has a lot to offer. It can, directly or indirectly through instruments negotiated under its auspices, contribute to many aspects of a well-designed ceasefire agreement: the establishment of an effective monitoring system along the ceasefire lines; a local conventional arms control regime complemented with confidence-building measures; the management of ‘windows of silence’ that might allow for negotiation; the disengagement of forces and withdrawal of troops and heavy weapons with transparency and verification measures; the exchange of information and data, including on arms diversion to unauthorized end-users which is a growing problem in wartime Ukraine (UNSC, 2023). As was the case for Article IV of the Dayton Peace Accords on Bosnia & Herzegovina, concluded in Florence in 1996 (Trezza, 2023), the OSCE could act as a complement to other mechanisms and peace-keeping troops operating on the ground and strengthen their stabilizing effect. In the long term, the OSCE can support the exchange

of war prisoners and the disarmament, destruction and decommissioning of weapons. It can address environmental destruction caused by the war, the 8th point in President Zelensky's 'peace formula' (Official Website of Ukraine, 2024), supervise elections...

Allegedly, the OSCE has failed to bring back peace in Eastern Ukraine and to prevent Russia's full-scale invasion. No, it has not. Its participating states have. The Organization is only a tool in the hands of its 57 'members'. Unencumbered by Russian obstruction and the inherent limitation of a consensus-based decision-making process, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM), an unarmed, civilian mission, deployed in 2014 to observe and report in an impartial and objective manner on the security situation in Ukraine and to facilitate dialogue among all parties to the conflict, boasts an impressive track record as a cutting-edge peace operation (Hug, 2024). Allegations have also circulated that the Minsk agreements (2014-2015) and the so-called Steinmeier formula (2016)—“a slimmer, simplified version of the Minsk agreements” (Miller, 2019)—failed to ensure a functioning and lasting ceasefire in the Donbas. Right indeed, but is it because of their intrinsic shortcomings or because of “short sighted policies and ambitions” (Arbatova, 2022, 117) and developments taking place in the period between their signing and the start of Russia's 'special operation' (Åtland, 2024)?

As a matter of consequence, the OSCE is said to have a bad reputation in Ukraine. Fair enough. But this equates to “tixer sur l'ambulance”, as one would say in colloquial French—literally “to shoot the ambulance” or pick out a scapegoat and ignore the real culprit. Anyway, the Ukrainians and the international community may have limited alternatives. When the crisis erupted in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, the OSCE was the only international organization accepted by

all sides, as both the “first responder” and the “last resort” (Fritch, 2015). In today's conflict, the OSCE may again emerge as the only option, since other formulas for ceasefire management appear unlikely and unfeasible.

A significant Western military presence in Ukraine is now viewed by many as the panacea—Europe's only option to prevent an even bloodier war (Gady, 2024). This solution looks appealing in front of a roaring fire at Chequers, the country residence of the British Prime Minister where K. Starmer and E. Macron recently exchanged on this topic (Ducourtieux & Ricard, 2025) but might not withstand a thorough 'fact checking'. The “multinational European peace-keeping forces monitoring the border” to patrol an 800 milelong buffer zone between the Russian and Ukrainian armies, which D. Trump (Oliphant, 2024) and former UK prime minister and close ally of Kyiv, Boris Johnson (Nicholls, 2024) were successively considering in November of last year, is unlikely to be tolerated by Moscow. Other “boots on the ground” as part of a ceasefire or peace deal, be they German (Rothwell, 2024) or French (Caulcutt, Kayali & Melkozerova, 2024), would equally fail to receive Putin's blessing. As for a traditional United Nations peacekeeping force, it would not provide sufficient deterrence. After the disastrous war in former-Yugoslavia in the 90s, the United Nations is not inclined to intervene again on the European continent. Of the two international organizations that Richard Haass and Charles Kupchan deem capable of hammering out the precise terms of a ceasefire in Ukraine—the UN and the OSCE (Haass & Kupchan, 2023)—that leaves only the OSCE.

It is difficult to determine the details of the peace plan for Ukraine that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan offered in November 2024, since his initiative was rejected by Moscow before the Turkish President could even present it at the G20 talks in Brazil (The Kyiv Independent,

2024b). It seems that his proposal of ‘strategic breathing space’ focused on a ceasefire with a mutual withdrawal along a line of demarcation and a demilitarized buffer zone in the Donbas, with applicable provisions from the 2015 Minsk-2 agreement, including a proposed strong OSCE monitoring force (Hacaoglu, Sink & Nardelli, 2024). The appointment of Feridun Sinirlioğlu, a Turkish career diplomat seen as a ‘loyalist’ of President Erdoğan, as OSCE Secretary General, will certainly facilitate the Organization’s comeback on the radar screen. Two experienced and committed successive OSCE chairs—Finland in 2025 and Switzerland in 2026—could help with brokering a way out of the crisis, although the former’s room for maneuver has been limited by its NATO accession.

“A negotiation is coming, and U.S. and European officials need to be ready” (Charap, 2025). The OSCE as well. Is the Vienna organization prepared for whatever unfolds? Until now, it might have conveniently taken cover behind the West’s common position that talking about the ‘day after’ in Ukraine risks weakening Zelensky’s hand and is therefore anathemized as an expression of defeatism and even betrayal, advancing the interests of the Kremlin. With many others, I disagree with Gerard Toal’s analysis of ceasefire negotiations and its acceptance of possible territorial concessions by Ukraine for peace (Toal, 2024; Anghel, 2024). However, I borrow Toal’s reference to “political taboo”: any open discussion of a ‘Plan B’ in Ukraine has been, until recently, seen as a taboo and “politically fraught” (Erlanger, 2023). This stance has long enabled the OSCE and its participating states to bury their heads in the sand and dodge the issue. I posit that strengthening support for Ukrainian forces and allowing Ukraine to remain in control of its own timetable and destiny is by no means incompatible with anticipation and preparation. The OSCE has been too long engulfed

into its own ‘fight for survival’ (Simonet, 2024). It remains to be seen whether the Organization and its Conflict Prevention Center (CPC) are capable of the same agility, reactivity and strategic preparedness as in 2014 when Switzerland, under the able leadership of Didier Burkhalter, OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and Swiss Foreign Minister, managed to set-up and deploy the SMM in 24 hours.

“The OSCE Approaching Fifty: Does the Organization Have a Future?”, William Hill asked two years ago (Hill, 2022). The long-awaited ‘Helsinki+50’ commemoration has now arrived, with no fanfare nor celebration. A ceasefire in Ukraine has a long way to come and the OSCE can work no miracles. 2025 will see whether the Organization manages to overcome the “most severe test (it) has faced since creation” (DiCarlo, 2022). The future of the European security architecture depends on it.



The OSCE has the tools, expertise and experience to contribute to a well-designed ceasefire agreement

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